

Incontinence and Continence Problems

Bladder and bowel control problems are common. Around four million Australians experience leakage from the bladder and bowel regularly – this is known as incontinence. Many others have bladder and bowel control problems such as frequency and urgency without leakage. Together these problems are often known as continence problems.

Although incontinence and continence problems have a considerable impact on a person's quality of life, most people do not seek help. Embarrassment often prevents people talking about their bladder and bowel problems. Some people restrict going out and have little social contact outside their home.

There is no need to become a recluse! The good news is that for most people these problems can either be cured or at least better managed. You can lead a normal life and you no longer need to plan activities around the toilet.

All kinds of people are affected

Incontinence and continence problems affect people of all ages, cultures and backgrounds. Despite popular opinion, older people are not the only ones affected. Some incontinence facts include:

- 1 in 3 women who have had a baby experience loss of bladder control
- 1 in 5 children aged seven wet the bed
- 1 in 100 adults never achieve bladder control at night
- 1 in 20 adults experience bladder and bowel control problems

Bladder and bowel control problems are not an inevitable part of ageing. 'What can you expect at your age?' is not an acceptable response to bladder or bowel control problems.

Incontinence and continence problems are symptoms

Incontinence and continence problems are symptoms of bladder or bowel dysfunction. They tell you that something is not quite right. Pelvic floor muscle weakness is a common cause of these symptoms. Changes to the nerves controlling the bladder, bowel or pelvic floor can also result in loss of control. Sometimes other health problems such as diabetes, stroke, Parkinson's disease, or multiple sclerosis can cause bladder and or bowel control problems.

Bladder symptoms

People with bladder control problems have one or more of the following symptoms:

- Leak urine with coughs, sneezes or exercise
- Leak urine on the way to the toilet
- Pass urine frequently
- Rush to the toilet (*urgency*)
- Get up twice or more at night to pass urine
- Wet the bed when asleep
- Feel their bladder is not completely empty
- Poor urine flow
- Strain to get the bladder to empty

- Frequent urinary tract infections

Bowel symptoms

- People with bowel control problems have one or more of the following symptoms:
- Leakage from the bowel with the urge to open their bowels
- Urgency with the urge to open their bowels
- Leakage from the bowel without the urge to open their bowels
- Leakage from the bowel on passing wind
- Unable to control wind
- Straining to empty their bowels

Types of bladder control problems

Urinary incontinence and continence problems may include:

Stress incontinence – leakage of small amounts of urine with exertion. Causes include childbirth, being overweight and prostate surgery

Urge incontinence – leakage following a sudden urge to urinate. Causes include stroke, enlarged prostate gland and Parkinson's disease

Overflow incontinence – leakage because the bladder does not empty well and overfills. Causes include multiple sclerosis and enlarged prostate gland

Functional incontinence – leakage of urine because a person was unable to get to or use the toilet due to a physical disability, a barrier in their environment or because of an intellectual or memory problem. Causes include dementia and poor mobility

Types of bowel control problems

Bowel problems have many causes and may result in the following symptoms:

Diarrhoea – passing loose bowel motions frequently and in a hurry. Causes include infection or bowel conditions such as Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis

Constipation – passing hard, dry bowel motions, which can be difficult to get out. Causes include not drinking enough fluid, eating a diet low in fibre and lack of exercise

Faecal incontinence – is an uncontrolled loss of a bowel motion. Causes include diarrhoea and constipation. It can also result from a problem in the lower bowel or anus, making it difficult to hold onto a bowel motion. Causes include childbirth and nerve problems such as multiple sclerosis

Management options

If you have incontinence or continence problems, you should seek help. There is a range of management options available. These depend on the type of incontinence you have and what you hope to achieve.

An incontinence management plan will usually consist of several of the following options:

- Adequate fluid intake of 1,500 - 2,000 ml each day
- A diet rich in fibre to prevent constipation
- A pelvic floor muscle exercise program

Bladder retraining program

Toileting program

Medication

Incontinence aids such as pads, condom drainage or catheters

Healthy bladder and bowel habits

There are things you can do to help keep your bladder and bowel healthy and avoid incontinence and continence problems. Healthy lifestyle choices include: Drink plenty of fluid; at least 1½ - 2 litres each day, unless your doctor advises you otherwise.

Eat well to prevent constipation and to maintain healthy body weight.

Exercise regularly to keep fit and to prevent constipation.

Tone up your pelvic floor with pelvic floor exercises for good bladder and bowel control.

Practice good toilet habits to prevent bladder and bowel control problems.

Go to the toilet to pass urine only when you have the urge to go; don't go 'just in case'.

Take time to completely empty your bladder and bowel.

Use the correct sitting position on the toilet.

When you have the urge to use your bowels, don't delay going to the toilet.

Where to get help

Your Doctor National Continence Helpline Tel. 1800 330 066

Victorian Continence Resource Centre Tel. (03) 9816 8266

Local continence service - call the National Continence Helpline for the contact details

Things to remember

Incontinence is common.

It has many different causes.

There are many things that can be done to manage incontinence.

In some cases, incontinence can be cured.

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